

PRINT BUSINESS

FOR FORWARD THINKING PRINTING

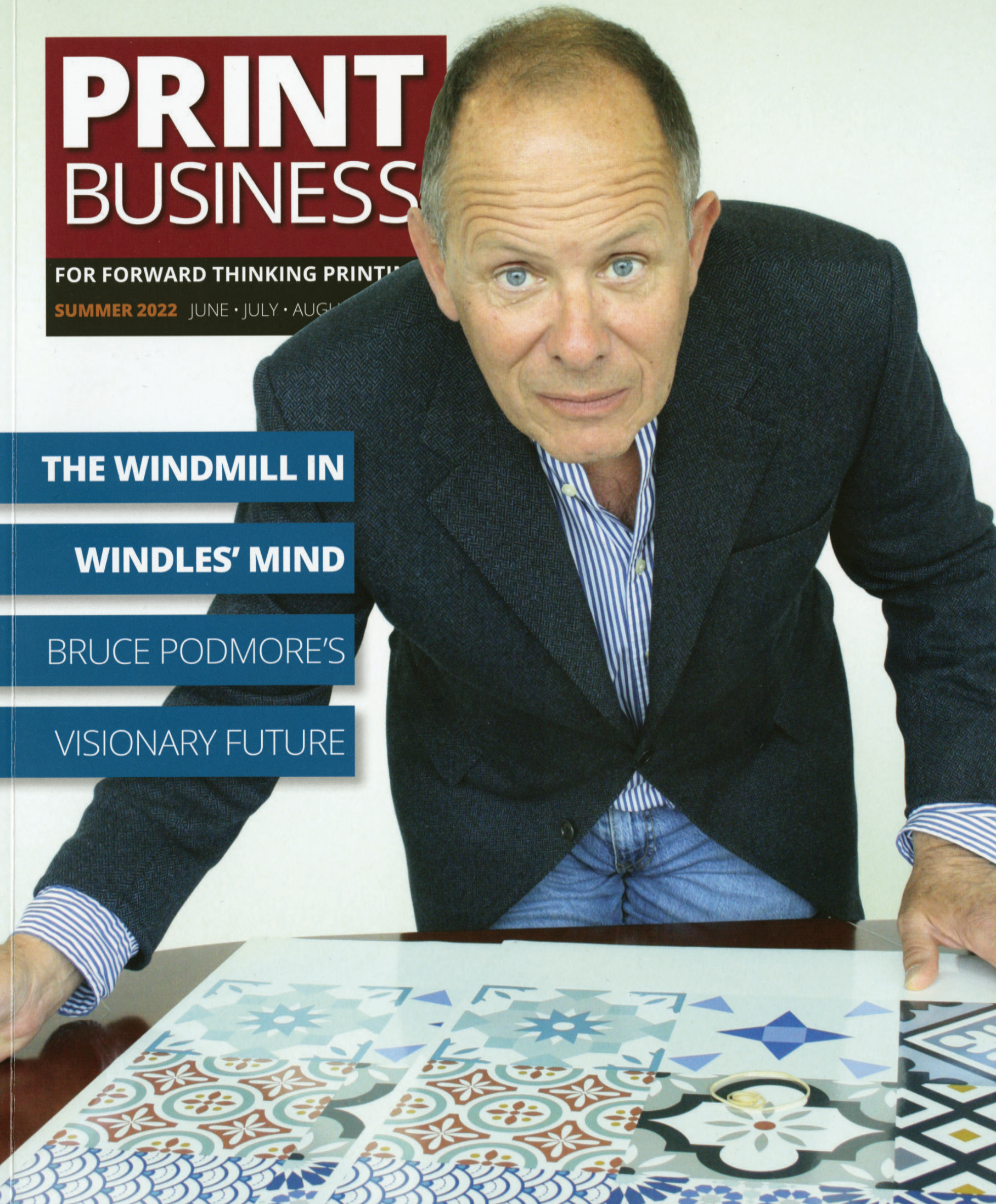
SUMMER 2022 JUNE • JULY • AUGUST

THE WINDMILL IN

WINDLES' MIND

BRUCE PODMORE'S

VISIONARY FUTURE



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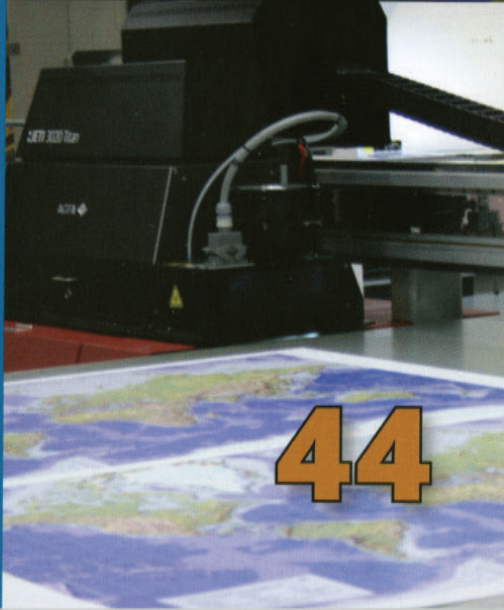
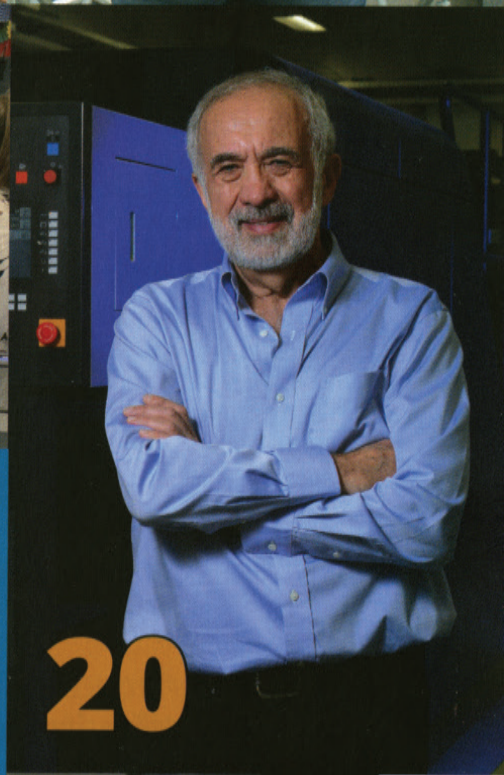
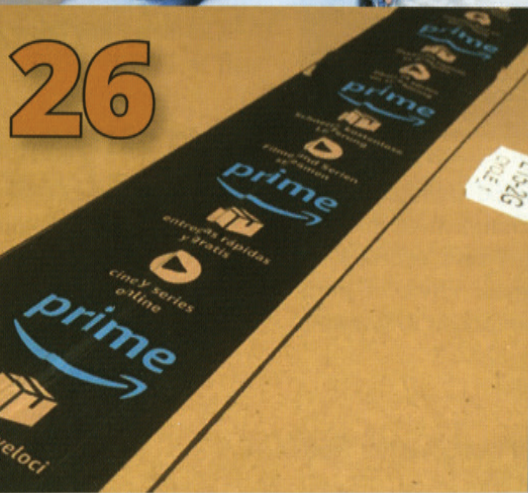
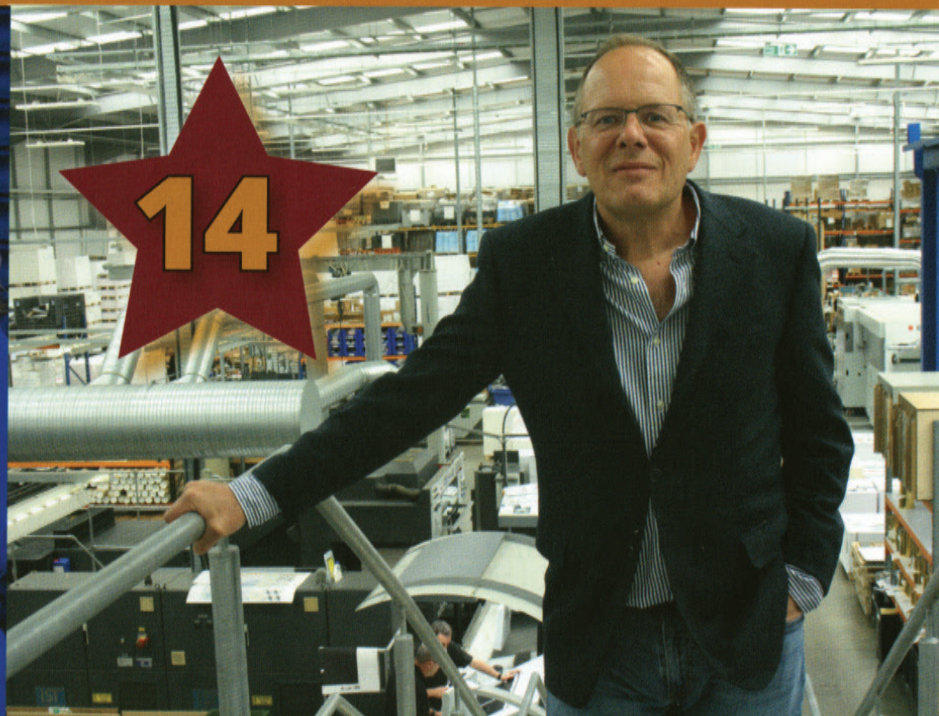
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QUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY GO HAND IN HAND AT WINDLES

THE GREETINGS CARDS SPECIALIST HAS COME THROUGH THE PANDEMIC IN A STRONG POSITION, BUT FAR FROM RESTING ON ITS LAURELS, THE BUSINESS IS PUSHING AHEAD WITH INVESTMENT IN PRINT TECHNOLOGY – AND POSSIBLY A WIND TURBINE.



Sales director Andrea Norcott is responsible for much of the day to day operation of the business.

Some print companies are run by accountants; some printers have sales people at the helm. Only a very few, in this country at least, have engineers in charge. This is not the case in Germany where Dipl-Ing is a title frequently bestowed on those running a print business indicating that they have an engineering degree. It is one of the most respected titles in that country, though rather less so in this country. But if it were possible, Bruce Podmore the managing director-engineer in charge of a British print business, Windles in Thame, would be Dipl-Ing.

This affinity with German companies is perhaps why his office has polished concrete floors, a spartan desk, plain white walls for the most part and chairs of black leather and stainless steel. There is no clutter. Furthermore the office is also a meeting room with the same chairs around a long table overlooked by a giant screen. At each day's production meeting this can display the upcoming work schedule, a presentation or perhaps one of the dashboards from the Tharstern MIS that has been honed to suit the precise requirements of this business.

This business has certainly changed in the two-and-a-half years in response to Covid. "It has been an extraordinary road," says Podmore. At the start of 2020 Windles could claim to be a pre-eminent printer of greetings cards, the sort that are sold through specialist and other shops in high streets across the country. When Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the first lockdown, it was a truly existential moment for Windles, one of those that are says Podmore, like the death of Kennedy, a day that becomes seared on your memory. With no shops to sell cards, there would be no purchases and no need to print cards. Windles was under threat. "I remember sitting with colleagues where we calculated we would need £600,000 if the crisis was to last nine months," he says. "Beyond that, goodness knows. My first thought had been 'Can they force us to close?'"

As it turned out, the overall market for greetings cards in the UK fell only 4% in the 12 months following lockdown and almost all that fall being attributed to cards linked to social gatherings like weddings and parties which for 99.999% of the country simply did not take place. Market demand meant more than 834 million individual cards were sold, many through the supermarkets which stayed open. Today Windles' sales are 17% up on 2019.

Back in March 2020 this lay in the future. Windles, like other businesses in print and beyond, took advantage of furlough schemes to

Managing director Bruce Podmore examines a sheet of litho printed vinyl. Print quality on all substrates is vital to Windles.



cut the overheads. Around a third of the staff were on furlough but within three weeks staff were back in the Thame factory as the efforts to connect with customers and pivots towards production of Covid-safe products for the NHS paid off.

Podmore puts it down to the consistency of service levels that Windles could offer customers as well as the quality and increasingly the sustainability of how the business operates. As far as he was concerned there was never any question of the business closing down. And for that he received hate mail. "I would get messages demanding 'how can you put more value on greetings cards than on human life?'. Other people we have seen did not work for six or nine months," he says. "It was about keeping going in the face of adversity."

And there was plenty of adversity to cope with. Like others, Windles has been fighting supply chain turmoil, made worse when so many greetings cards have been produced in China and publishers have faced challenges with shipping containers. There has been the vagaries of raw material supply, even without a Brexit effect, and the drive to push plastic out of the greetings card sector – at least by some retailers. The large retailers wanted plastic to be eliminated as much as possible; independent retailers have liked the protection that a plastic sleeve can give.

Windles development of Kard Klasp a few years ago to clip together the card and an envelope with a small sticker has proved timely and this now includes paper wrap to hold batches of cards which would once have been

shrinkwrapped. But there are still requests for plastic. "A publisher might ask for 6,000 cards, half without plastic to go to supermarkets, half with plastic wrap for independent retailers. We tell them No – This is the Windles' offering."

The Windles approach is to combine a Total Quality Management approach under the direction of sales director Andrea Norcott and a Total Environmental Management strategy that goes well beyond the tick boxes and sound bites that can be prevalent. "It is not just about the green sound bites," says Podmore. "There is a human element to sustainability. And we see this as critical. It can seem for instance as if nobody is investing in training and recruitment." Skills shortages are the result. "Experienced folder gluer operators simply do not exist any longer," he adds.

Windles has direct experience, having installed a Mistral folder gluer for both carton and card work. It has also installed at the start of the year a Bobst Novacut with integral stripping and at the start of next year will install a Koenig & Bauer Rapida 106 X. This will be in action by March next year. It is a first for a business that has hitherto existed on a diet of Heidelbergs. "You know where you are with Heidelberg," he explains. That also means it builds an excellent standard press. Windles did not want standard. And there was extensive testing to make sure that the choice was correct for the business. In the end the Rapida X was selected for the engineering tweaks that have made Windles effective as a business and for a responsiveness that Podmore has warmed to.

"Whenever I call Dresden they know who I

ALL THE GEAR WINDLES

am,” he says. “That’s impressive, it means I’m valued.”

The new press will have four LED UV dryers rather than just mercury vapour UV lamps which are far hungrier in terms of energy than the newer technology even if LED UV is not yet at the same level of maturity. The reduction in energy needs is a huge issue. With a 38% hike in electricity prices, Windles faces finding an extra amount that is not far short of half a million pounds each year.

It has already switched to a biomass boiler, feeding off old pallets for space heating, and has taken a good few steps along the environmental road. Waste has been sorted from well before the company moved to its new premises in Thame in 2016. Now plastic containers are crushed to reduce space requirements when shipping them out for further processing. Likewise waste foil is compacted into bales that become fuel at a cement works. It cuts the trips that are needed and is more effective for the business. Food waste ends up feeding worms that produce a concentrated feed for growing more vegetables.

This is all part of the company’s Loop-It continuous improvement scheme under which

it is constantly monitoring and refining the materials it uses, how and what it produces. There are reminders around the building and pamphlets for visitors to take away and absorb. As well as choosing and developing consumables that fit this ethos, it is promoting their use to customers. The flitter that is used on greetings cards is a biodegradable version rather than the sort based on polyester. Its substrate of choice is Incada Exel a grade from Iggesund made at Workington, a mill that has a biomass boiler using willow that local farmers are encouraged to plant for both energy and land management benefits.

And the search continues for more recyclable plastics when plastics are necessary and fibre based alternatives when they are not. Its paper banding alternative to film wrapping was introduced before the recent concerns about plastic in the retail chain leading to massive deplastication in every aspect in response to public antipathy to the material, recyclable or not. Energy though is the big one that Windles aims to crack.

“We have needed to be both proactive and reactive to the challenges we face,” Podmore explains. “That means that we identify the

elements that we can identify and change.” And for an engineer, the solution is startlingly clear. Windles needs to generate its own power. That is not merely through covering the roof with photovoltaic solar panels, it means installing a windmill capable of generating 1.4MW, that is one where its blades stretch high into the sky.

There is space alongside the factory, though there are some new homes nearby and planning permission is not in place. The sweetener is that Windles will provide eight free to use recharging bays for Thame’s inhabitants and energy to a number of houses nearby from the excess power generated, as what Podmore hopes for is far more than the company needs. If he is forced to scale back on the plan, there is the option of PV panels across the roof and a smaller wind turbine. “We will face planning constraints,” he says with simple understatement. But it would result in a breakthrough as while some printers can generate enough energy to run the business through solar panels, none has yet run the factory from what Podmore calls “mechanical generation”.

Total Quality Management runs alongside Total Environment Management. “We only

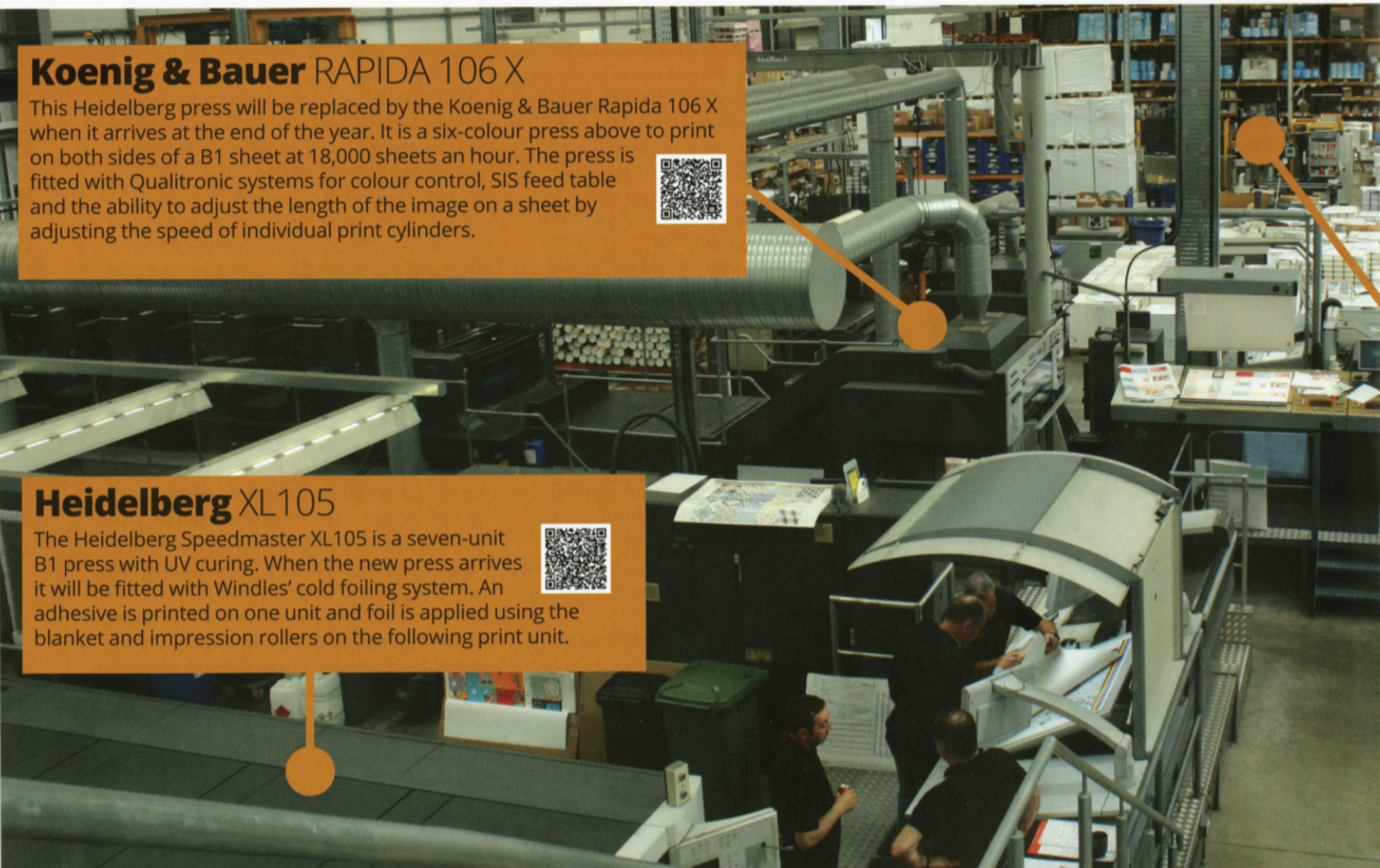
Koenig & Bauer RAPIDA 106 X

This Heidelberg press will be replaced by the Koenig & Bauer Rapida 106 X when it arrives at the end of the year. It is a six-colour press above to print on both sides of a B1 sheet at 18,000 sheets an hour. The press is fitted with Qualitronic systems for colour control, SIS feed table and the ability to adjust the length of the image on a sheet by adjusting the speed of individual print cylinders.



Heidelberg XL105

The Heidelberg Speedmaster XL105 is a seven-unit B1 press with UV curing. When the new press arrives it will be fitted with Windles’ cold foiling system. An adhesive is printed on one unit and foil is applied using the blanket and impression rollers on the following print unit.



have one standard,” Podmore says. “It depends on total control of dot gain on all substrates with density control as part of that. It’s about predictability and repeatability.”

And this led to the investment in the new press. Moving away from Heidelberg is unquestionably a wrench, but the demands that Windles is placing on the machine mean that it had little choice. As a volume press manufacturer building machines in two countries, Heidelberg needs its own repeatable processes to deliver consistency. Koenig & Bauer, he says, has greater ability to allow flexibility. A sheet with multiple greetings card designs can run from neons and special colours to pastel shades. This is far from standard four-colour process printing.

Podmore then dives into the sort of enthusiastic and deep exposition of the SIS side lay free infeed system and how gearless cylinders allow the press to stretch the image to enable precise registration that mean the marketing manager’s eyes glaze over a little.

On a practical level switching to LED UV will mean consumption of 9kW per unit compared to the 12 mercury vapour arrays that Windles currently has across the factory with

each lamp set at 35kW. There will be four LED arrays on the new press.

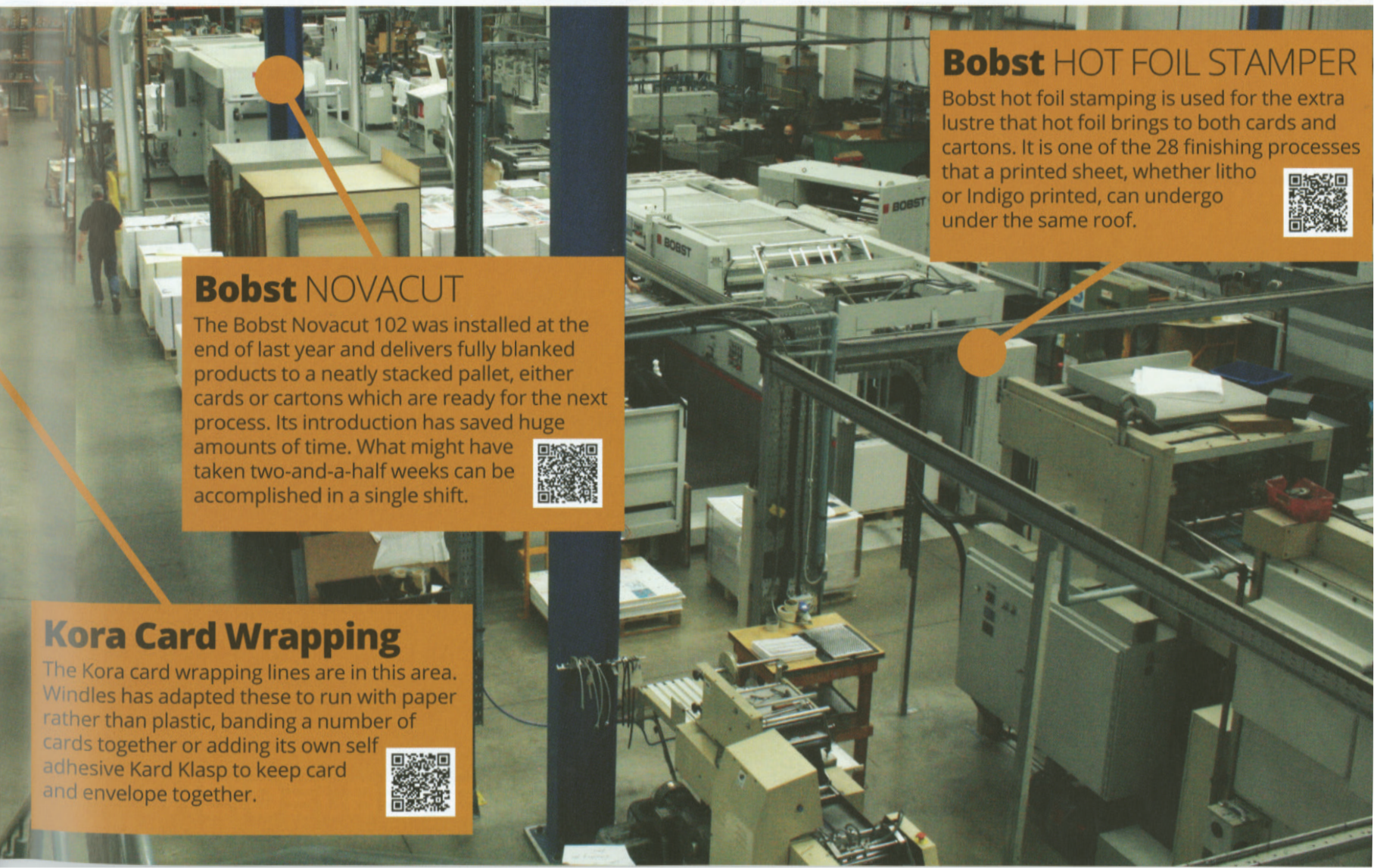
Its arrival will mean a shuffle around. Currently there are two B1 Speedmasters. One, fitted with the cold foiling unit that Podmore himself designed, will be leaving. The other will take the cold foiling system, leaving space for the Rapida X. It is a six-colour press with perfecting after the first unit. The clamp down on what were deemed harmful photoinitiators has slowed development of LED suitable varnishes and inks for all applications, hence mercury vapour lamps will still be needed. “Inks have become lazier and slower,” he says. “That means we will have to run a hybrid system. We can, for instance, run a lot of fluorescent inks which helps achieve impact with the card, but needs mercury vapour curing,” he says.

The press will run at 18,000sph once installed and commissioned, faster than anything the company has had before. The investment in finishing has run ahead of the press. A Bobst Mistral runs down one side of the factory. Not far away are two Longford machines, the choice for many in greetings cards. While they were build 25 years apart,

Podmore points out very little has changed, requiring supervision by an operator and turning out 6,000 cards an hour. Windles still has them, but efficiency has shot up with the Mistral. It has made a huge difference in folding rates and output per operator as it can reach 50,000 cards an hour.

Likewise the Novacut has delivered another leap in productivity per head. Instead of manually loading a die to set the platen and then taking the sheets to remove unwanted waste to prepare the cards for folding, the cards are cut from the sheet with the blanked material dropping into waste. The finished stack ends up on a pallet interleaved with paper to give the stack stability and to make it easier to remove cards from the stack when needed. The pallets of neatly stacked piles of cards or carton blanks are ranged against the machine having had no physical handling since the board was loaded into the feed stack of the printing press.

It has made a huge difference says Podmore, noting that delivery had been delayed because of shipping difficulties from China and a shortage of suitable containers. A job that would take two-and-a-half weeks is now completed in a shift.



Bobst NOVACUT

The Bobst Novacut 102 was installed at the end of last year and delivers fully blanked products to a neatly stacked pallet, either cards or cartons which are ready for the next process. Its introduction has saved huge amounts of time. What might have taken two-and-a-half weeks can be accomplished in a single shift.



Bobst HOT FOIL STAMPER

Bobst hot foil stamping is used for the extra lustre that hot foil brings to both cards and cartons. It is one of the 28 finishing processes that a printed sheet, whether litho or Indigo printed, can undergo under the same roof.



Kora Card Wrapping

The Kora card wrapping lines are in this area. Windles has adapted these to run with paper rather than plastic, banding a number of cards together or adding its own self adhesive Kard Klasp to keep card and envelope together.



SAY WHAT?

BRUCE PODMORE ON THE WINDLES ETHOS



WHAT HAPPENED WHEN LOCKDOWNS WERE ANNOUNCED?

I remember sitting with colleagues where we calculated we would need £600,000 if the crisis was to last nine months. Beyond that, goodness knows. My first thought had been "Can they force us to close?"

HOW FAR DOES CONCERN FOR THE PLANET EXTEND?

A publisher might ask for 6,000 cards, half without plastic to go to supermarkets, half with plastic wrap for independent retailers. we tell them No – This is the Windles' offering.

HOW ABOUT THE PEOPLE WINDLES EMPLOYS?

We are as responsible for the environment of our people as the planet. We can't have people stripping board by hand any longer. That is simply not sustainable, we can't ignore that.

HOW DOES WINDLES MAINTAIN QUALITY?

We only have one standard. It depends on total control of dot gain on all substrates with density control as part of that. It's about predictability and repeatability.

Aside from the blinding action the speed of makeready and operation has helped increase productivity per head, one of the measures necessary to become more productive. It also chimes with strategies to improve conditions for staff. "We are as responsible for the environment of our people as the planet. We can't have people stripping board by hand any longer. That is simply not sustainable and we can't ignore that," he says.

There is a giant display on the factory floor next to the vending machines where operators can check in to the Tharstern MIS to monitor their own performance and that of other shifts. The idea is to help people to ways of performing better. It is part of a new ethos to recruitment and training. It is also recognition that not everybody brings a print background with them, but if from an engineering or similar industry, should be able to learn fast.

Windles has changed the way that happens. Instead of working alongside a full on supervisor checking everything, people are trusted to figure it out for themselves and to refer up the line when necessary. "People develop much faster," he says, "than when we had an experienced person working alongside the inexperienced. Now the supervisor will instruct the trainee 'You are responsible for the operation – I'm simply here to help.'"

The dashboard for monitoring production is one aspect where Windles has been sharpening up in the functional side of the business. There is a similar dashboard and set of screens in the sales area under the watchful eye of Norcott. Then there is Mark Armston as finance director. He joined in 2018, has no print experience, though did work for Paperlinx and Robert Horne before that. He has quickly tightened up the finance side of the business, aided by the MIS and by the way that Norcott has the sales arranged. "There are three directors that run this business," says Podmore.

The company employs sales people, but not account handlers as such. "They are internal sales," says Norcott, "not account handlers." They will be recruited from a face to face sales background rather than for print knowledge. "They understand the importance of service."

Social media may be changing the role of sales and how it functions, but helping customers remains a fundamental part of the job. "A lot of customer we interact with are start ups that need some help," Norcott says. "Educating customers is part and parcel of hand holding for us."

There is plenty of scope for upselling and essentially being proactive with customers. And

customers respond well. According to Podmore this positive approach to customer service helped get Windles through lockdown.

The technology means too that an invoice can be issued when a job leaves the factory, accelerating the payment cycle compared to issuing invoices at the end of the month. "We could not run this business the way that it is without the level of financial control from Mark," says Podmore. A few years ago he reckons that Windles was using just 25% of the capability of the MIS. Now Windles is pushing at the frontier of what is possible.

Norcott runs through screens that show all manner of detail on customers thanks to integration with CRM systems. There is integration too between sales and production through the scheduling routine which somehow balances the work coming in to ensure that it is completed on time, printed on either litho or Indigo digital presses and that it has progressed through any of the 28 possible finishing processes. Then inks and boards can change, amounting to a nightmare if trying to track this manually or through a simple spreadsheet. The increasing price of board has been challenging and has also brought a change in customer behaviour. The MIS shows that average run lengths have increased of late. Customers have been willing to pay for faster turnaround, says Norcott. And while that is still the case, committing to a longer print run will reduce the unit cost of each card balancing at least to some extent the cost of the card used at the risk that some cards might need to be stored for longer.

She has control over the customers and orders through the software. Planning for lockdown was not simply about the immediate impact she says. "We had to anticipate when lockdown was going to finish as we knew we would face a tsunami of orders, receiving three months works in three weeks." Windles coped thanks to the combined strengths of those in the business and the way that it is set up. One takes care of the finance, one takes care of the sales, the third takes care of production and the technology used.

Podmore has the latter role, in his element in deep discussion with Norman Coyde, the print manager who has been with the business for more than 30 years, talking over the challenges of printing colour accurate ceramic tiles on PVC for a catalogue that will be used in Germany.

It seems appropriate somehow that print from a factory that might easily be on the edge of Stuttgart is going to be used in the country.